

The art of learning: Put more arts specialists in schools

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You may recall a famous university study a decade ago that seemed to say that listening to Mozart's music can make children smarter. Suddenly there were recordings on sale with titles like "Mozart for the mind."

We're not sure that we subscribe to the so-called Mozart effect, but we do believe that studying music or painting or dance helps with brain development and makes it easier for children to learn other things like mathematics and literature and science. That is especially true for some kids with particular learning styles. After all, people don't all learn in the same way.

That's why a bill proposed for next month's Legislature strikes a major chord with us. It would provide funding to hire 100 arts teachers and place them in as many elementary schools. They would be specialists in music, theater, dance and visual arts. That would be enough for about one-fifth of the elementary schools in the state.

This would be money well spent because there are numerous studies that suggest the arts aid learning. Drawing, for example, can help students understand the content and organization of writing. Early childhood music training can aid cognitive development, and music listening can enhance reasoning about space and time. Dance promotes nonverbal reasoning, persistence and self-confidence. Drama helps us to understand social relationships and complex issues

You can drill the multiplication tables or have kids memorize the names of the planets, but that technique will not reach every child. There is scant evidence that it will even create greater mental discipline in the kids who can do it.

Some kids need to move when they learn. Some kids need to hear things spoken rather than read it on a printed page. Some kids respond more readily to visual images than they do to sounds, or vice versa. And often these techniques seem to reinforce each other in one brain.

That's why we need sports for some kids and music for others and painting for still others. Many students can benefit from them all. But with the relentless push in the schools to stress math and science and writing, these other disciplines are getting pushed aside. Children, all children, may be the losers.

Besides, the overture to "The Marriage of Figaro" is a joy in itself. Just ask a physicist.